

FOR HEARING BEFORE THE
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Name: Dr. Udit Raj
Title and Organization Affiliation: National Chairman, All India Confederation of
SC/ST Organizations & Indian Justice Party

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LEFT BEHIND: THE IMPORTANCE OF RESERVATION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE DALITS

More than 200 Million people in India are being hurt by the growth of the private sector in India. The reservation system that has guaranteed some measure of economic advancement for the Dalits is being slowly destroyed by the progress of privatization in India. Millions of Dalits will lose their government-protected employment, called reservation, and will be unable to find work due to caste discrimination. While Indian industries will not integrate Dalits in their companies, I come before you today to call on the United States Congress to influence US companies to seek out Dalits in hiring and training and help us climb out of the three thousand year old grave dug for us by caste-minded Hindus.

The Economic Times reported on 29 September, 2005 that the profits from leading Indian companies had jumped by 40% while employment only grew 3.8%. The public sector in India accounts for more than 8% of the employment but has been rapidly shrinking from privatization and globalization. More than 2,000,000 jobs have been lost in the public sector in the past few years. Reservation, a part of India's constitution from the beginning, ensured that a certain percentage of these public sector jobs would be reserved for Dalits. As the public sector shrinks, Dalits have no employment alternatives: globalization is adversely affecting Dalits and therefore the developed countries, particularly the United States, must uplift the Dalits in a situation where their own countrymen consider them worth less than animals.

Millions of untouchables (Dalits) in India have been subjected to humiliation, degradation, untouchability, starvation, rape, murder, and more for the past 3000 years. Indian society was divided into four classes or varnas (castes): on the top are Brahmins (priestly class), next to them are Kshatriyas (warrior class), then the Vaishyas (business class), and at the bottom are Shudras and untouchables. These untouchables can not share any public platform, and even their shadows are said to pollute so-called upper castes. The “Laws of Manu”, which regulates the social and political lifestyle of Hindu society in India, bars untouchables from reading, pronouncing, and hearing holy books and hymns like the Vedas; if they hear them molten lead is to be poured in their ears, their tongues are to be cut off if they pronounce them, and their eyes are to be pierced with red hot iron if they read them. Even African slaves never faced such draconian social and religious norms. The Indian Government may say that their old Constitution, the Laws of Manu, has been replaced by a modern Indian Constitution framed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. But in reality, the old Constitution still holds the order of the day, in day-to-day life.

The world may not believe this nightmare is factual truth, but it is so. Why did the apartheid problem catch the attention of the world? It is because nature and religion did not help in masking the reality. Blacks and whites are both creations of nature and this realization has helped in exposing the discrimination of brothers with black skin. Such discrimination was not backed by religion, be it Christianity or Islam. But in our case the social discrimination, which has pervaded all walks of life, is caused by the Hindu religion. The untouchables have been consoled to live a dehumanized life because they are said to be condemned to it by the desire of gods. It is so deeply entrenched that even Dalits have internalized their slavery. Accordingly, it is considered good if they suffer because they are washing away the sins of their past lives and their present suffering will supposedly liberate them in the next life.

UN article 1 of the UN Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) is inclusive of caste discrimination as formally interpreted and explained by the CERD Committee in 1996, ICCPR (International Convention on Civil and Political Rights) in 1997 and the UN Sub-Commission for protection and promotion of Human Rights in 1999. Consider this - on the one hand the Indian Constitution recognizes discrimination for the basis of reservation – on the other, the representatives of the Government of India in international bodies consistently deny the existence of caste discrimination. The Indian Government and its dominant castes are not shy about receiving international aid from the UN and developed countries in the fields of health, education, and rural development. Yes, somehow they continue to say that caste discrimination is an internal matter. Even the most developed countries like the USA and Japan have gracefully accepted discrimination in their respective countries. When nature-created differences like blacks and whites are being fought then why can not man-made social norms arising from the caste system also be fought? Our problems are more severe than apartheid. Can anyone deny that the killing, rape, starvation or social discrimination of Dalits is not rampant? Isn't it a fact that safeguards like reservation provided in the Constitution are frequently flouted? Isn't it true that today also untouchables are carrying human excreta on their heads? Isn't it a fact that even in the wake of the tsunami tragedy that struck coastal

Tamil Nadu, many relief camps were put up by the Government and other voluntary bodies, wherein Dalits were not allowed to share food and shelter side-by-side with upper castes and others? Even in the cases of death, they were treated separately. Among human beings, caste discrimination still continues to be practiced in India which proves that the dominant castes cannot change their mindset.

The only progress made by the Dalits is due to reservation in services and politics. Dalits constitute about 25% of the total population of India, meaning Dalits are due nearly one quarter of all public jobs and political appointments. So far, reservation has not been fully implemented. For example, out of 120 Secretaries in the Government of India, there are hardly any Dalits. Of the 22% of jobs saved from Dalits and native Tribals in India in the central government, only around 14% have been filled at the highest level and the next highest level. These levels are consistent with those at Public Sector Undertakings and Banks. There are almost no Dalit judges.

Making matters worse, the government of India has been slowly eroding the power of reservation. In 1997 the Department of Personnel & Training issued five anti-reservation orders on the basis of Supreme Court judgment which have eroded the base of reservation.

The All India Confederation of SC/ST Organizations has been struggling since 1997 for restoration of the benefit of reservation and its implementation. Outside of reserved employment, the opportunities afforded Dalits are abysmal. Poverty among Dalits remains around 50%. Dalits often earn less than 1 US Dollar per day. The total budget expenditures from all ministries for Dalits and other lower castes in India amount to Rs. 62,530.4 million. That is only \$6 spent by the government per Dalit for the entire year. Currently there are 5.21 million Dalit job seekers registered with the Ministry of Labor who are being denied equal opportunity because of caste. Most of these will only find jobs as manual scavengers and cleaners. Many will have to hide their identity to survive. The untouchables do not have any participation in the fields of industry, trade, commerce, higher education and judiciary, art and culture. Imagine what would be happening to them if there were no reservation at all.

I want to close by drawing a comparison between your country and India. 150 years ago slavery was abolished in the United States. At that time, blacks had no legal rights, had a high illiteracy rate, had no culture to call their own, and had few employment opportunities outside of manual labor. Now, I see that here in America there are 75 black CEOs in major corporations. I see African-Americans in sports, film, music, and on TV. I see Oprah Winfrey and other black leaders help lead America. I see legal cases where blacks present their case and are given justice. I see a country with opportunity for all regardless of color or background.

In India, a system of caste has kept the Dalits down for 3000 years. There are no Dalit CEOs. Barely one-third of all Dalits are literate. Dalit children dream of becoming actors and actresses but their dark skin prevents them from finding a place on screen. Murder, grievous offences, rape, arson, and other atrocities are rampant against Dalits. Recently,

more than 50 houses of Dalits were burnt at Gohana in Sonapat District of Haryana state in India. Before this, five Dalits were lynched for a cow Carcass. They were going to sell its hide to the market and the dominant castes came to know and attacked and brutally murdered them. In reaction to the incident, the international vice-president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which is also quite active in the USA, Mr. Giriraj Kishor stated that a cow was more important than Dalits in Hindu scriptures. In 2001, about 44,000 atrocities were reported as per the National Crime Record Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. This is the official figure, but many more incidents go unreported, and if these are also taken into account, it will be more than hundreds of thousands of cases.

The US Government should come forward to save the interests of the Dalits. It should take up the cause with the Government of India so that the interests of Dalits are protected. The United States has a powerful voice in the international community and the Congress is the originator of that voice. Urge your companies to hire Dalits. Urge your diplomats to bring the issue of caste up to the Indian government. Allow Dalits space at the United Nations. The All India Confederation of SC/ST Organizations is the largest organization of government employees in India, but Human Rights Commission of the UN doesn't provide opportunity to its representatives to articulate the grievances of Dalits. Right now an abundant amount of US funds, donations, and other assistance in the form of education, knowledge, technology, and in kind donations are being transferred to India, but Dalits hardly get anything out of these. Even funds and assistance provided for Dalits are being stolen by others. Almost all NGOs are owned by the upper castes, and it is they who articulate Dalits' grievances, often without the knowledge of the Dalits. A White businessman established a Medical College in Mississippi exclusively for Blacks, but there are no such examples in India. The US can provide opportunities to Dalits to seek jobs in the USA while providing them Visas. Educational Institutions can be established in India so that not only the knowledge of English is given to Dalit children but also important degrees are available. Break the hold that caste has over CEOs in foreign and multinational companies. Give the Dalits the opportunity to enter the international economy.

Due to modern communication and high technology, the world has become like a village and hence people living in any part of the globe are morally bound to stand and share with others in their suffering. I am quite hopeful that members of this Committee will watch to see that from now onwards the Dalits receive fair treatment from US companies and leaders.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions.

